

FY08 Defense Authorization also Promotes Seamless DOD to VA Transition for Soldiers and Troop Pay Raise

(Washington, D.C.) - Congressman D. Rodriguez (TX-23) praised passage of the FY 2008 Defense Authorization conference report today which strengthens our military, improves readiness, and supports our troops and their families. The conference report includes two key provisions by Congressman Rodriguez: extension of the Family Medical Leave Act (FMLA) to the families of Wounded Warriors, and the removal of a key barrier in the transition of our returning soldiers to the Veterans Administration health care system. The FY 2008 Defense Authorization Bill today passed by 370 to 49. The bill now moves to the President for signature.

"Extending the FMLA to the families of our Wounded Warriors is simply the right thing to do for those who serve as caregivers to our injured soldiers on their transition back to civilian life. Giving military families the flexibility for additional leave time by extending FMLA will allow our wounded servicemen and servicewomen to be with loved ones in their time of healing and also ensure that our combat injured soldiers have family advocates on hand to make sure they receive the high quality health care they deserve," said Congressman Rodriguez. "This bipartisan defense legislative package will also fund better health care for our troops, better their pay, and provide quality benefits our troops and their families have earned. Additionally, I helped craft an included piece of legislation that will ease the transition of our soldiers from DOD to VA health care. I am proud to serve our troops and their families in Texas' 23rd Congressional District and across the nation."

Two key provisions by Congressman Rodriguez were included in the FY08 Defense Authorization Bill:

- Family Medical Leave Act (FMLA) extension to families of Wounded Warriors - Rodriguez legislation H.R. 3556

Congressman Rodriguez's bill, H.R. 3556, was incorporated into the FY08 Defense Authorization bill, extending the FMLA to provide leave to eligible employees in order to care for the service member. Those eligible include federal civilian employees, who are the spouse, son, daughter, parent, or next of kin of a seriously injured service member). The legislation will also extend the amount of leave time available for caregivers of seriously injured service members from 12 workweeks to 26 workweeks.

- Removal of a key barrier to a seamless electronic medical data transition for our soldiers from the VA and DOD

Congressman Rodriguez authored this amendment jointly with Reps. Mitchell, Space and Walz to remove a long-standing bureaucratic barrier to the transfer of soldiers' vital medical records to the Veterans Administration (VA) upon discharge. The legislative language ensures that when a soldier authorizes the transfer of his or her medical information to the VA, the

Department of Defense (DOD) will recognize that authorization and transfer the information. Specifically, the amendment clarifies legal provisions regarding Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) that currently slow down and complicate the transition.

The FY08 Defense Authorization bill provides the necessary resources and authorities to quickly and efficiently reverse declining trends in military readiness, and will also provide our service members in harm's way with the best gear and force protection possible.

Highlights of FY08 Defense Authorization conference report include:

- \$1 billion to create the Strategic Readiness Fund to address equipment shortfalls, fully funding the Army's and Marine Corps' equipment reset requirements, and authorizing \$980 million to provide the National Guard and Reserve critically needed equipment;
- \$17.6 billion, an increase of \$865 million, for additional MRAPs, \$4.8 billion for anti-IED efforts, \$3.3 billion for up-armored Humvees, \$1.5 billion for add-on armor for other vehicles, and \$1.2 billion for body armor;
- Giving the military a pay raise, larger than requested by the President, prohibiting fee increases in TRICARE and the TRICARE pharmacy program, and strengthening benefits for the troops and their families, as promised in the GI Bill of Rights for the 21st Century;
- It includes the Wounded Warrior Act, which responds to the Walter Reed Army Medical Center scandal by improving the care of injured soldiers returning from Iraq and Afghanistan -- addressing many of the issues raised by the Dole-Shalala Commission and implementing several of its recommendations;
- It improves accountability and cracks down on waste, fraud and abuse in contracting, including requiring new steps to manage and oversee contracts in Iraq and Afghanistan and requiring detailed new regulations for private security contractors, such as Blackwater employees, mandating the appropriate use of force;
- Includes new bipartisan reporting requirements under which DOD will regularly brief Congress on the planning taking place to responsibly redeploy U.S. forces from Iraq. Additionally, DOD will be required to submit an annual report on the status of pre-positioned equipment stocks, including its plan, timeline and funding requirements for reconstituting all pre-positioned stockpiles.

Congressman Rodriguez serves as a Member of the House Veterans Affairs Committee.

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